Better Together: The Additive Effects of Ethical Leadership and Engagement on Decreasing Stress and Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that leadership within organizations can have profound impacts on employee outcomes. Recent research has focused on understanding how ethical leadership in particular can elicit positive outcomes regarding employee wellbeing (Kaffashpoor, & Sadeghian, 2020). Likewise, engagement research has established that when a workforce is highly engaged there are corresponding levels of health and wellbeing (Osam et al., 2020). Individual stress and anxiety are increasing on an annual basis, and the COVID-19 pandemic further strained employees, prompting organizations to seek out innovative means to deter the negative effects of these wellbeing variables. Although research demonstrates the positive impact of ethical leadership or engagement alone, studies have yet to investigate their combined effects on wellbeing. Chief among the concerns of employers are turnover, burnout, and reductions in performance, all of which result in potential financial challenges for organizations (Goh, Pfeffer, & Zenios, 2015b). Accordingly, this study investigates the additive impact of ethical leadership with engagement as a means of reducing employee stress and anxiety. Results from moderation analysis of survey data for 459 participants revealed that the combination of ethical leadership and engagement led to a significant decrease in both stress and anxiety above and beyond the effect of either variable alone. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS
Ethical Leadership, Engagement, Stress, Anxiety, Wellbeing

Introduction

Large scale ethical scandals such as Enron in the 1990s set off a chain reaction of interest in ethical leadership with the purpose of preventing ethical transgressions, due in-part to impact on the bottom line (Monahan, 2012; Moss, 2002). These scandals impact organizations not only because of their moral nature, but also due to their negative impact on company reputation and profit. Because of these negative impacts, organizational leaders are now expected to lead the way in setting a culture of ethical leadership and perpetuating an ethical climate (Stouten, Van Dijke et al., 2013). In connection to this goal, researchers (see Monahan 2012) have examined ethical leadership with the goal of generating knowledge that practitioners can use to prevent future ethical transgressions. In doing so, they have generated more scholarly knowledge about ethical leadership that includes how to define it, measure it, and the characteristics of ethical leadership (Monahan, 2012). For example, an important feature of ethical leadership is its relationship with workplace behaviors. According to Trevino et al. (2000), workplace behaviors inform leader reputations and are key to whether or not leaders are considered ethical. Leaders who model ethical behavior stress the importance of organizational values as well as appropriately reward and discipline ethical and unethical behaviors, thus laying the foundation for the creation of an ethical climate (Trevino et al., 2000).

In recent years, the direction of ethical leadership research has shifted from exploring how to channel it to avoid bad outcomes (such as the Enron scandal), to how to leverage it to yield positive outcomes such as

higher levels of performance that allow organizations to remain at a competitive advantage (Ali Chughta, 2016). For example, there is research that has shown that ethical leadership is positively associated with increased employee creativity and performance (see Olivier, 2012), increased organizational citizenship behaviors (Brown & Trevino, 2006), higher levels of work engagement (Chughtai, 2014; Demirtas, 2015), and greater job satisfaction (Avey et al., 2012). Thus, based on this growing body of research ethical leadership can be considered a positive organizational construct that not only prevents negative outcomes but results in desirable organizational outcomes.

However, little research has investigated the circumstances in which ethical leadership is most impactful, and in fact, emergent research has highlighted the potential *downside* of ethical leadership, particularly for the individual level outcome of wellbeing. Wellbeing, when used in this context has been used as a proxy variable that is described as a positive emotional state where negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, or anger are not present (See Diener et al., 2009; Fu et al., 2020; Yang 2014). Studies such as Yang (2014) and Fu et al. (2020) have suggested that ethical leadership has a negative relationship with employee wellbeing and negative effects on employee behavior at work. In these studies, the authors posited that ethical leadership's negative impact on wellbeing was due, in part, to felt pressures to "act right" at all times, as modeled by the individuals' leaders. These findings run counter to most ethical leadership research (cf. Brown & Trevino, 2006; Demirtas, 2015; Monahan, 2012) and highlight the need to develop a stronger understanding of the circumstances in which organizations can maximize the positive impacts of ethical leadership while limiting or even eliminating the potential downsides.

To this end, there exists a pressing need for further examination of the situations and/or contexts that could increase or decrease the impact of ethical leadership on employees in the workplace. This emergent research is particularly relevant now as the landscape of work has changed as a result of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Following the pandemic, as organizations navigated changes in their work environment, considerable attention has been given to employee wellbeing as an important factor to higher levels of performance and the reduction of turnover (see for example Gorgenyi-Hegyes et al., 2021; Tedone, 2022). Additionally, reports of higher levels of burnout and exhaustion have led to decreased employee engagement which in turn negatively impacts employee wellbeing (Dillard & Osam, 2021). Therefore, employee engagement and wellbeing have remained key areas of concern for employers in the post COVID-19 pandemic era.

Contemporary research on the impact of ethical leadership on employee behavior, as well as the importance of employee wellbeing and employee engagement in the post COVID-19 pandemic era presents a unique opportunity for research. Importantly, the studied variables can have a profound and practical impact on human resource development and management. For example, recent research has negatively linked ethical leadership to employee sense of entitlement (Joplin, et al., 2021), and employee stress (Zhou, et al., 2015). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between ethical leadership, employee engagement, and wellbeing with a specific focus on understanding the contexts that potentially increase the positive impact of ethical leadership on wellbeing. As with prior studies of this nature (see Fu et al., 2020; Yang 2014), this study also considered wellbeing as a positive state marked by the absence of negative emotions. Specifically, stress and anxiety were used as proxy variables where their presence is indicative of lower levels of wellbeing. Additionally, this study was intended to be exploratory in nature and bolster existent evidence to aid researchers and practitioners in better understanding the effect of ethical leadership. Further, it may enable the development and design of workplace contexts that can facilitate positive outcomes of ethical leadership specific to employee wellbeing. In what follows, we review previous scholarly work on the variables in this study, detail the methods and results, and finally discuss implications of our findings for practice and research.

Literature Review

This section reviews the variables of interest in this study i.e., ethical leadership, employee engagement, and wellbeing with the goal of providing a summary of previous research and laying the foundation for the methodological approach utilized in the next section. First, a synthesized review of ethical leadership is presented, followed by employee engagement, and then wellbeing.

Ethical Leadership

Ethical behaviors in the workplace are not limited to leaders and managers, but rather, they are the shared responsibility of everyone within the organization (Stouten, Van Dijke et al., 2013). However, due to past scandals (e.g., Enron, Tyco) organizational leaders are expected to set the tone for ethical behaviors in the workplace and as such there is a heavy expectation that they act as the moral compass for the company. Therefore, how leaders behave is used as a way to measure how ethical they are. The use of behaviors and actions to assess ethical leadership is tied to Brown et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of ethical leadership as a type of leadership that emphasizes actions that are grounded in honesty and integrity. Brown et al., defined ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making" (p. 120). In short, one can judge the ethical level of leaders based on the range of behaviors and actions they display and how these are perceived by employees in the workplace. It should be noted that prior to the Brown et al., conceptualization, ethical leadership was considered to be a part of other types of leadership theory rather than a stand-alone construct (Bedi et al., 2016). This is seen in scholarly work in influential leadership theories such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, and authentic leadership (Bedi et al., 2016; Stouten, van Dijke et al,. 2013). In Bass' (1985) transformational leadership theory, for example, leader behavior can be categorized as ethical or pseudo transformational. Leaders who are pseudo transformational aim for undesirable goals using motives that are not legitimate. Simply put, transformational leaders who are unethical have selfish motives, abuse their powers, and demonstrate behaviors that are inconsistent with moral values (Bass, 1985; Stouten, van Dijke et al.,2013).

The main difference between ethical leadership and classic theories such as transformational leadership is the presence of a transactional component where leaders communicate and encourage ethical conduct rather than simply being a role model that others aspire to be (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership therefore consists of two components, modeling behavior and transactions. To support the two-component view of ethical leadership, researchers have used social learning and the social exchange theory to demonstrate how ethical leadership differs from existing leadership theory. Through social learning, people learn appropriate behavior by watching others and from their own experience (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Treviño 2006). Therefore, employees who see their leaders act ethically and gain experience by acting in a similar manner internalize values-driven behavior and are more likely to consistently be ethical (Brown et al. 2005; Brown & Treviño 2006). Social exchange theory concerns itself with reciprocity, and researchers (e.g., Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Podsakoff et al., 2000) have identified that ethical leaders tend to create positive organizational environments (characterized by trust and fairness) by using positive and negative reinforcement that makes it likely for employees to reciprocate with beneficial organizational behavior (e.g. organizational citizenship behaviors).

In sum, what is clear from the extant literature is that ethical leadership is not merely a sliver of other leadership theories but a unique construct that stands alone. More, research on ethical leadership has evolved from understanding what it is to studying its relationship with desirable organizational outcomes. For example, research shows that ethical leadership is positively associated with increased prosocial behaviors (Avey et al., 2011; Bonner et al., 2014; Kacmar et al., 2011), leader and job satisfaction (Avey et al., 2012; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), work engagement (Chughtai et al., 2014; Demirtas, 2015) and higher performance (Bonner et al., 2014; Bouckenooghe et al., 2014). While results from these studies provide evidence of the benefits of ethical leadership, a recent meta-analysis conducted by Bedi et al. (2016) provided more context to the nature of these relationships. Overall, they found moderately strong positive associations exist between ethical leadership and outcomes such as follower self-efficacy and job satisfaction ($r = 0.56$). However, the majority of the positive associations with beneficial organizational outcomes noted were weak (e.g., organizational commitment, $r = 0.38$; job performance, $r = 0.22$; job engagement, $r = 0.37$). The key takeaway from their work however is that ethical leadership has stronger effect on employees' attitudes about their leader (e.g. leader satisfaction, $r = 0.70$; leader effectiveness, $r = 0.77$) than on individual or organizational outcomes (e.g. job performance, organizational commitment).

Based on the findings above, care must be taken when discussing the strength of impact of ethical leadership on organizational outcomes as it is at best weak to moderate. The next step in ethical leadership research needs to focus on identifying situations that can magnify the effect of ethical leadership on individual

organizational outcomes. This includes research about other work-related constructs (e.g. employee engagement) that can combine with ethical leadership to produce stronger associations on individual and organizational outcomes.

Engagement Typologies

The term engagement stems from Kahn's (1990) seminal work on personal engagement. Kahn defined engagement as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional) and active, full performances" (p. 700). Since Kahn's work, several engagement typologies and definitions have emerged that are often misused in research (Shuck, 2011; Shuck et al., 2017; Shuck & Reio, 2014). Examples of the emergent typologies include employee engagement (Shuck et al., 2017), work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002), job engagement (Rich et al., 2010) and organizational engagement (Saks, 2006). Employee engagement was selected for this study because according to Shuck and Reio (2014), it incorporates Kahn's (1990) key assumptions that shape a person's decision to be engaged, unlike many of the other engagement typologies (cf. Cole, Walter, Bedeian, & O'Boyle, 2011; Rich et al., 2010). Employee engagement is defined as "a positive, active, work-related psychological state operationalized by the maintenance, intensity, and direction of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy" (Shuck et al., 2017, p. 269).

Employee engagement occurs in three distinguishable levels: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Shuck et al., 2017; Shuck & Reio, 2014; Shuck et al., 2017). Cognitive engagement is drawn from Kahn's (1990) idea that an employee will seek to appraise their work to determine meaningfulness, safety, and the availability of resources to perform their work (Shuck et al., 2017). This appraisal forms part of a broader, more situation-specific assessment that ultimately informs an employee whether or not to engage (Shuck et al., 2017; Shuck & Reio, 2014). To put this into context, employees whose cognitive appraisal of the workplace is negative results in adverse impacts on behavior such as turnover and lower commitment (Nimon et al., 2011; Shuck & Reio, 2014).

While cognitive engagement seeks to determine availability of resources, emotional engagement on the other hand focuses on widening and expending emotions related to work (Shuck & Reio, 2014). Connectedly, Shuck and Wollard (2010) stated that emotional engagement (stemming from affective appraisal) results in the maintenance, intensity, and direction of energy focused on a target. Common terms associated with employees who are emotionally engaged include pride, trust, and knowledge (Shuck & Reio, 2014). Emotional engagement is thus dependent on the outcome of an employee's cognitive appraisal of the workplace (Shuck et al., 2017). According to Shuck et al., (2016), the cognitive and affective appraisal that characterize cognitive and emotional engagement respectively, are intertwined and reliant upon each other for intentional work behavior to occur.

Behavioral engagement is the overt manifestation of the employee engagement process (Shuck et al., 2016; Shuck et al., 2017; Shuck & Reio, 2014). This is the observable behavior that employers typically expect of their employees in the pursuit of organizational goals (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Shuck & Reio, 2014). Employees who are behaviorally engaged expend more individual effort and are likely to be the ones who go 'above and beyond' or 'work twice as hard' to meet goals and targets (Shuck & Reio, 2014).

Employee Wellbeing

Employee wellbeing is acknowledged as an important social consensus and in the workplace has been linked empirically to improved work performance and promoting physical and mental health (Nielsen et al., 2017; Robertson & Cooper, 2011; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). While consensus exists on the importance of wellbeing, there is less so on its definition, and consequently wellbeing is conflated with other terms such as engagement (Kowalski, & Loretto, 2017). The lack of a unifying definition of wellbeing is because as a construct, it is so broad and cuts across many disciplines (e.g. psychology, medicine, sociology) with each area providing its unique view of wellbeing (Kowalski, & Loretto, 2017). What is clear from the extant literature is that while the term wellbeing may be broad, there are several dimensions to it that can be studied separately such as pleasure and life satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2001), physical and psychological functioning (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007), and positive social interactions and connections (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). It is for reasons such as these that previous researchers have defined and used proxy variables in the stead of wellbeing. Examples of some of these proxy variables include depression, stress, anxiety, fear, and

anger (See Diener et al., 2009; Fu et al., 2020; Lovibond & Lovibond 1995; Yang 2014). Likewise, we adopted a similar approach and for the purposes of this study, we chose to focus on the dimension of wellbeing that encompasses the state of individuals' mental, physical, and general health (see Dana & Griffin, 1999). Furthermore, we decided on this dimension and interpretation of wellbeing due to the COVID-19 pandemic that prompted the necessity for an increased amount of research around stress and anxiety related to working in a global pandemic.

This study focuses on two well-known constructs associated with wellbeing: stress and anxiety. Although often referenced synonymously, the two constructs are unique. Stress refers to a dynamic condition wherein the individual encounters an opportunity, demand, or desired resource with an uncertain and important outcome (Spector et al., 2002). Employee stress has been linked to health outcomes such as increased heart rate and changes in metabolism, psychological outcomes including reduced job satisfaction and mental exhaustion, and behavioral outcomes such as decreased work productivity, increased absences, and turnover (Shuck et al., 2017).

Workplace anxiety is defined as "feelings of nervousness, uneasiness, and tension about job-related performance" (Cheng, & McCarthy, 2018, p. 1), and is associated with higher levels of turnover and counterproductive work behaviors. Both stress and anxiety have been found to lead to psychological disorders among employees.

High levels of stress and anxiety in employees can lead to absenteeism, turnover, and counterproductive work behaviors (see Shuck et al., 2017), and each of these outcomes are expensive monetarily, and in the health of the organization. Individual stress and anxiety are increasing on an annual basis, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further strained employees, prompting organizations to seek out new and innovative means to deter the negative effects of these wellbeing variables. Chief among the concerns of employers are turnover, burnout, and reductions in performance, all of which result in large financial concerns for organizations. In fact, a recent study conducted by the National Safety Council found that organizations spend over $15,000 on average annually for each employee experiencing mental health issues, a figure that they say "likely underrepresents the current cost to employers" as prompted by the global pandemic (National Safety Council, 2021). Accordingly, organizations should, and are, seeking out new and inexpensive ways to proactively lessen employee stress and anxiety to deter costs of both mental health resources, and the negative outcomes associated with these wellbeing concerns.

The variables under consideration in this study on their own have a sizeable amount of prior research. However, there is scant research that has examined the ways in which they are linked. This gap in the literature feels pertinent now because of the increased emphasis that organizations are placing on leader-employee relationships and cultivating highly engaged work cultures where all employees feel valued and consequently contribute positively to organizational performance (Osborne, & Hammoud, 2017). Employee engagement has therefore become a core part of organizational objectives because of its demonstrated links to increased employee investment in performing at a high rate (Iman et al., 2021). At the heart of employee engagement application is leadership, and to this end, the litany of connected research often recommends that leaders take proactive measures to demonstrate respect of employees as this helps to develop work culture that promotes employee engagement (Shuck et al., 2017; Osam et al., 2020). When employees feel their leaders treat them with respect, they are more likely to think of the employee-leader relationship in terms of a social exchange (Yu et al. (2018). Employees therefore are more willing to 'exchange' engagement focused outcomes (e.g., putting as in extra effort at work, delivering high quality work) with leader actions that are characterized by fairness, integrity, honesty (Goswami & Agarwal, 2022). These leader actions such as integrity and honesty are hallmarks of ethical leadership as defined by Brown et al. (2005). Therefore, experiencing fair treatment, care and support working with ethical leaders (Islam et al., 2019b), should correspond with higher levels of employee engagement, reflecting the principles of social exchange theory that underpin ethical leadership (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Podsakoff et al., 2000). Therefore, based on the reciprocal nature of the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement, this study proposes that:

Hypothesis 1: Ethical leadership will be positively associated with employee engagement

As engagement research continues to expand, it has begun to be associated with employee wellbeing (Osam et al., 2020). More specifically, there is an emergence of empirical research on employee engagement that has found direct links between how people experience their work and how it impacts their wellbeing (Fairlie, 2017). In this line of engagement research, the focus is on developing the understanding between work and health while implementing strategies that prioritize wellbeing. This engagement research is in response to employees reporting increased levels of stress particularly in the wake of hybrid and remote work (Kondratowicz et al., 2022). This focus has prompted many organizations to focus on employee engagement as a means to address wellbeing issues (e.g., stress, anxiety, burnout) that in the long term are proving to be consequential for job performance (Rudolph et al., 2021). As previously mentioned, wellbeing has typically been represented by proxy variables in past research. As such, this study proposes that employee engagement will be positively associated with wellbeing or in the case of this study, negative associated with the proxy variables of stress and anxiety.

> *Hypothesis 2: Employee engagement will be negatively associated with stress*

> *Hypothesis 3: Employee engagement will be negatively associated with anxiety*

Generally,, ethical leadership has been associated with positive outcomes including but not limited to increased prosocial behaviors at work (Avey et al., 2011; Bonner et al., 2014; Kacmar et al., 2011); higher performance (Bonner et al., 2014; Bouckenooghe et al., 2014) and of particular importance to this study, employee engagement (Chughtai et al., 2014; Demirtas, 2015). While there are a few studies (highlighted earlier) that empirically link ethical leadership with negative outcomes on wellbeing in particular, these studies are outliers compared to the general trend in ethical leadership research. Therefore, while this study seeks to provide additional empirical evidence in support of the ethical leadership-wellbeing relationship, it takes the espoused view that ethical leadership leads to positive wellbeing outcomes. As a result, this study proposes that:

> *Hypothesis 4: Ethical leadership will be negatively associated with stress*

> *Hypothesis 5: Ethical leadership will be negatively associated with anxiety*

If results from the outlier studies previously mentioned were supported by our study, we would expect that employee engagement would negate or lessen the impact of ethical leadership on stress and anxiety. In short, employee engagement would be used as a moderating variable to assess its impact on the ethical leadership-wellbeing relationship.

As previously highlighted employee engagement has been empirically linked with positive outcomes. Therefore, it is expected that if there are any negative effects of ethical leadership on wellbeing, employee engagement could, in part, counter that.

> *Hypothesis 6: Employee engagement will moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and anxiety such that higher levels of employee engagement will correspond with an increase in the strength of the relationship between ethical leadership and anxiety.*

> *Hypothesis 7: Employee engagement will moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and stress such that higher levels of employee engagement will correspond with an increase in the strength of the relationship between ethical leadership and stress*

Methodology

Participants

There was a total of 808 participants that began this study. Ultimately, 459 participants' data were used in analyses. Participants were full (86.9%) or part (13.1%) time employees over the age of 18. Within our sample 61.7% of participants were male, and 71.5% were Caucasian. Data from 349 participants were removed prior to analyses due to incomplete data (multiple questions left blank, including incomplete demographic items), failed attention-check questions, or perceived survey manipulation (e.g., providing the same numerical response to all Likert-scale items).

Instrumentation

Measures within this cross-sectional survey included demographic items, the Ethical Leadership Scale (Yukl et al., 2013), Employee Engagement Scale (Shuck et al., 2017), as well as Anxiety and Stress scales (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Participants responded to demographic items concerning age, gender, employment status, and race. The Ethical Leadership Scale (Yukl et al., 2013) includes 15-items on a 6-point Likert scale and a high reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$). Sample items include "My boss shows a strong concern for ethical and moral values" and "My boss is honest and can be trusted to tell the truth." The Employee Engagement Scale (Shuck et al., 2017) includes 12 items split across three sub scales on a 5-point scale. The reliability of each subscale is as follows cognitive engagement ($\alpha = 0.94$), emotional engagement ($\alpha = .88$), and behavioral engagement ($\alpha = .91$). Sample items include "I really push myself to work beyond what is expected of me" and "I give my job responsibility a lot of attention". The Lovibond & Lovibond (1995) Depression Anxiety Stress Scale's shortened version contains 21-items from the three subscales (depression, anxiety, and stress; seven items for each construct) with a high reliability ($\alpha = 0.93$). The scale is scored from 0 (Never) to 3 (Almost Always) and asks respondents to apply statements to their last week. Sample items from the scale include "I found it hard to wind down" and "I found myself getting agitated". For this study, only items from the stress and anxiety measures were included, as previous literature has not suggested that ethical leadership or employee engagement would impact depression. In addition to these measures, two attention-check items, which read "In years, how long has your supervisor/boss been in their current position? If unsure, please give your best estimate or state "unsure". This question was repeated in the middle of the survey, and respondents whose responses to both did not match were removed from the study. The second attention-check measure was a paragraph containing a list of instructions to which participants were supposed to respond 'no' at the end of the paragraph. Participants who selected 'yes' were removed from the study. If participants failed to answer or incorrectly responded to these attention-check items, they were disqualified from continuing and did not receive financial compensation for their participation.

Procedures

A cross-section survey with self-report measures was used for data collection. This research was conducted through the use of Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a crowdsourcing marketplace in which individuals can respond to user-posted surveys in exchange for financial compensation. MTurk also allows those collecting data to limit who can and cannot respond to their surveys. MTurk has been found to produce data quality comparable to student-based samples, and its use in academic research has become commonplace in the past decade due to the ease of access to participants, and the speed of data collection (see Bartneck et al., 2015; Buhrmester et al., 2011; Holden et al., 2013; Mason & Suri, 2012; Rouse, 2015). In this study, respondents were limited to those with current full-time or part-time employment and located in the US. Respondents were compensated forty cents in exchange for completing a roughly 10-15-minute survey. At the onset of the survey, participants were asked employment-related questions and those who did not qualify (those without employment) were redirected and did not complete any additional measures. Likewise, those that failed attention-check questions were redirected and did not complete the other measures. All others completed each of the above-mentioned measures.

Results

Zero-order correlations were conducted to test Hypotheses 1 through 5 (see Table 1). As expected, results showed significant and negative relationships between ethical leadership and anxiety ($r = -.12$, $p < .05$), but surprisingly not stress ($r = -.08$, $p = .10$). Likewise, there was a significant and negative relationship between employee engagement and anxiety ($r = -.11$, $p < .05$) but again, no significant relationship between employee engagement and stress was found ($r = -.04$, $p = .38$). Finally there was a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement ($r = .58$ $p < .05$).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Ethical Leadership, Engagement, Stress, and Anxiety

	Mean (SD)	Correlations			
		1	2	3	4
1. Ethical Leadership	4.54 (0.90)	-			
2. Engagement	4.04 (0.62)	58**	-		
3. Stress	3.06 (0.91)	-.08	-.04	-	
4. Anxiety	2.75 (1.01)	-.12*	-.11*	.77**	-

Note: $N = 459$; SD = Standard Deviation; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

To test Hypotheses 6 and 7 moderation analyses were conducted using a series of stepwise regressions, where employee engagement moderated the relationship between ethical leadership and anxiety or stress. In step 1 of each moderation, the wellbeing variables (stress and anxiety) were regressed on ethical leadership. In steps 2 and 3, employee engagement and the interaction term of ethical leadership with employee engagement were added, respectively (see Figure 1). Results showed that employee engagement significantly moderated the relationship, such that the interaction of employee engagement and ethical leadership strengthened the negative relationship between ethical leadership and both anxiety $(F(1, 458) = 4.55, p < .01, \Delta R^2 = .029)$ and stress $(F(1, 458) = 5.75, p < .01, \Delta R^2 = .030)$. Thus, there was support for Hypotheses 6 and 7.
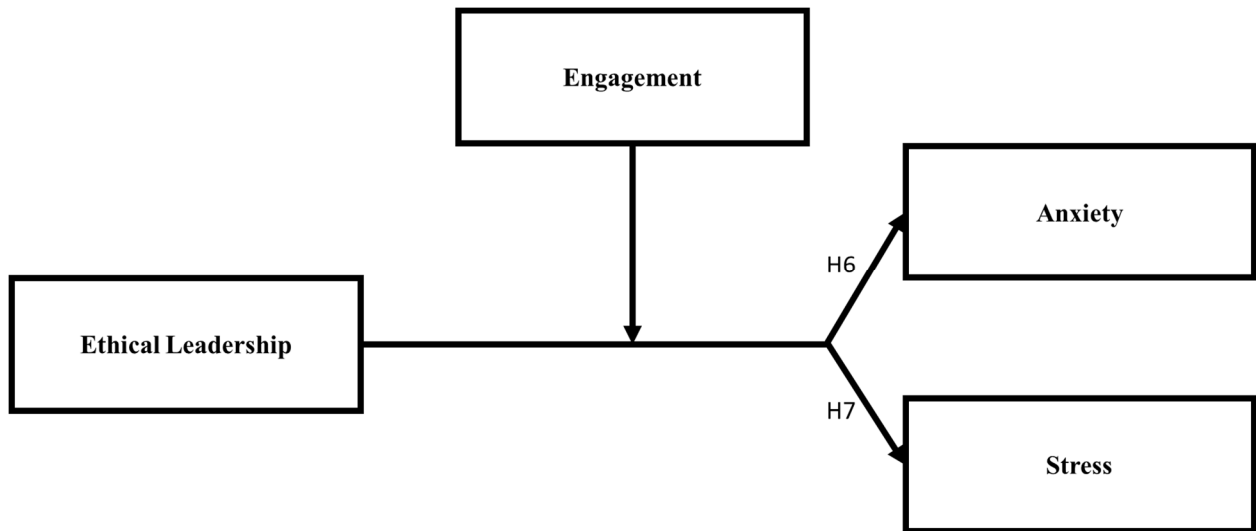

Figure 1. Proposed relationship between ethical leadership, employee engagement with stress and anxiety.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 predicted that ethical leadership would be related to decreased stress and anxiety. Although non-significant for anxiety, in both stress and anxiety, there existed a negative relationship, such that higher levels of ethical leadership were linked to lower levels of stress and anxiety. In the case of stress, this relationship was statistically significant. These findings suggest that ethical leadership can indeed have a meaningful impact on indicators of wellbeing, but that this relationship is limited in its explanatory power.

Stress and anxiety are multifaceted constructs, and although organizational leadership can have a positive impact on both, it is important to recognize that leadership alone is unlikely to fully explain the wellbeing outcomes of workers. Instead, research should emphasize that leadership, in tandem with other organizational

interventions and individual-level constructs, can play a positive role in the reduction of wellbeing-related variables such as stress and anxiety.

Hypotheses 6 and 7 predicted that the moderating effect of employee engagement would impact the relationship between ethical leadership with stress and anxiety. For both stress and anxiety, employee engagement moderated the relationship between ethical leadership and stress/anxiety such that higher levels of employee engagement strengthened the negative relationship between ethical leadership and stress/anxiety. This finding suggests that employee engagement plays a significant role in the reduction of the wellbeing-related variables when paired with ethical leadership. Thus, a work environment with both ethical leadership and employee engagement is more likely to have employees with lower levels of stress and anxiety.

Discussion

This research adds to the growing body of literature supporting the positive impacts of ethical leadership on both individual and organizational-level outcomes (e.g. Brown & Trevino, 2006; Monahan, 2012). More importantly, the findings suggests that ethical leadership does not operate in a vacuum, and that in fact, ethical leadership may be more impactful in an environment of employee engagement.

The benefits of ethical leadership cannot be understated, and this study further demonstrates the positive impact ethical leadership can have on wellbeing variables. There are several methods for increasing ethical leadership within an organization. First and foremost, ethical leadership can be effectively modeled (see Brown et al. 2005; Brown & Treviño 2006). Ethical leadership begins at the top of the organization and leaders set the tone for all employees with regard to their conduct within the company. Employees should not only see their leaders modeling ethical behavior, they should also know and understand how their leaders ethically overcome organizational constraints such as deadlines and challenging goals. Leaders who exhibit ethical behavior in spite of constraints provide guidance to followers in navigating their own ethical dilemmas, and this can reduce the likelihood of followers engaging in unethical behavior (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Zhang et al., 2018). Modeling ethical behavior must be an organizational emphasis, particularly in instances of remote work, where leader-follower interactions may be more limited, and employees have more autonomy over how they chose to spend their work hours. In these remote-work situations, leaders must place an added emphasis on how their actions impact both follower perceptions of leader ethicality, and the consequences of followers' unethical behavior.

Employee engagement is widely recognized as an important area of focus to maintain a workforce that is happy and productive (Dillard & Osam, 2021). Companies that are transitioning to a more remote-work model, may need to place an even greater emphasis on strategies to increase employee engagement. Recent qualitative research found that a transition to remote work led to higher levels of employee presenteeism and higher stress (Adisa et al., 2023) As a result, there is a high demand for strategies that can improve and sustain engagement levels in the workforce (Osam & Shuck, 2020). Considering the impact that employee engagement combined with ethical leadership has on wellbeing, the following recommendations are grounded in the theoretical principles that underpin employee engagement and as such are presented in tandem with them. At a minimum, engaged employees are optimistic, keep good interpersonal rapport with each other, and also show high level of performance in the organization (Jena et al., 2018). Central to this is creating a work environment that is characterized by trust and respect (Osam et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important that the culture of an organization reflects trust and respect and is actively promoted by organizational leaders.

There is an abundance of research demonstrating the benefits of ethical leadership and employee engagement within organizations. The study at-hand examined the interactional benefits of leadership with employee engagement on the wellbeing outcomes of stress and anxiety. Notably, although ethical leadership led to a decrease in both stress and anxiety, these effects were small, and for stress, non-significant. However, when ethical leadership was combined with employee engagement, both stress and anxiety were significantly reduced. The findings of this study suggest that organizations should strive to have ethical leaders who also are committed to fostering high levels of employee engagement, and that organizations would benefit from implementing practices designed to promote both ethical leadership and employee engagement; perhaps more important however, the study's findings indicate that the approach to improving employee stress and anxiety should be multifaceted and wide-ranging. There is unlikely to be a single intervention that comprehensively

addresses stress and anxiety. Accordingly, organizations need to investigate the causes of employee stress and anxiety and adapt their practices and policies to be reflective of their unique concerns.

Study Implications and Recommendations

There are a number of organizational implications of the research at hand specific to fostering increased levels of ethical leadership and employee engagement. First, it is known that unethical leadership is linked to unethical employee behavior, negative health outcomes, and counterproductive work behaviors (see Monahan, 2012). Counter to the findings of Yang (2014) and Fu et al. (2020), this study adds to the growing body of literature that links ethical leadership to positive individual outcomes. Practitioners and managers should continue to emphasize the importance of leaders at all levels to engage in ethical business practices, and to lead with ethics. In addition to modeling ethical behavior, organizations must also establish transactional relationships with followers, such that ethical behavior is rewarded and encouraged (Brown et al., 2005). The transactional element of ethical leadership must be addressed in a two-fold approach. First, organizations and their leaders must emphasize and make clear the ethical expectations of their followers. These expectations should be addressed formally through organizational guidelines and policies and should be reinforced informally through leader feedback and guidance when followers are navigating ethical dilemmas.

Second, the performance management system of an organization should reinforce and reward those that behave ethically. Ethical expectations should be clear and directly reflected in the language of a formal performance appraisal, limiting the ambiguity of follower action by establishing clear ethical boundaries and norms. Likewise, the performance management system should emphasize follower processes rather than outcomes, to ensure that engaging in ethical behavior remains a focal point in the work of all within the organization. For example, a typical organization may reward a sales team and their leader for reaching a specific sales goal. The reward in this instance, is conditional on the outcome, regardless of how the outcome was achieved. Instead, organizations should reward both the outcome, and the process used to attain the outcome. To facilitate a process-based reward system, customer perceptions of fairness and honesty of the sales team should also be considered when determining how to allocate raises, promotions, and other organizational rewards to sales teams. Rewards tied solely to outcomes will inevitably result in the easiest, sometimes less ethical means of reaching those outcomes.

Finally, organizations must train both leaders and followers about the ethical standards of the organization and how to approach ethical dilemmas, should they arise in the course of work. Although there is limited research on the training of ethical leadership, studies have suggested that training individuals on ethical behavior and ethical decision-making is often more effective when learners are provided with a variety of strategies and methods to address novel problems (Antes et al., 2009) rather than being given exact solutions to exact problems.

When it comes to employee engagement, there are a couple of recommendations based on the study findings that are rooted in enhancing work relationships and improving work culture. First, a simple yet inexpensive recommendation to promote trust and respect in the workforce is through sustained acts of kindness (Osam et al., 2020). Examples of acts of kindness include holding doors or elevators open for others, exchanging pleasantries, leaving handwritten notes of appreciation, and brewing another pot of coffee after taking the last cup. Committing acts of kindness has been shown in research to result in numerous positive outcomes such as increased self-confidence, increased likelihood of reciprocating responses, positive feedback (e.g. appreciation, and gratitude), as well as an increase in social interaction (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2010). Additionally, based on the theory of employee engagement (Shuck et al., 2017) the more acts of kindness are prevalent in the workplace, the more likely it is that employees will associate positive emotions with the workforce (Osam et al., 2020). This in turn will increase the presence of observable outcomes of employee engagement that employers desire including organizational citizenship behaviors, lower turnover, and increased organizational commitment (Osam & Shuck, 2020).

A second recommendation to improve employee engagement in the workforce is connected to organizational practices that demonstrate care and concern for employees through employee resource groups (ERGs). This recommendation is specifically tied to employees from historically underrepresented groups and is presented as a way for organizations to avoid blindly replicating employee engagement strategies that are not suited to

the unique needs of their workforce (see Osam & Shuck, 2020). Employee Resource Groups are voluntary, employee-led groups whose aim is to foster a diverse, inclusive workplace through generation of ideas about improving workplace conditions for underrepresented groups, which can then be brought to leaders for implementation. Recent research has indicated that employees from underrepresented groups (e.g. race, gender, ethnicity) often feel that attempts at employee engagement practices in the workforce are not meaningful and demonstrate a lack of care and understanding. For example, individuals from sexual minority groups have reported instances where genuine attempts by leaders at providing competency training on gender and sexuality have backfired because of the lack of understanding and use of appropriate terminology (Dillard & Osam, 2021). Therefore, to avoid this, organizational leaders should utilize employee resource groups (ERGs) to generate rich and meaningful information from different identity groups within their workforce. This information should include feedback about current employee engagement practices and ways to make the work environment more inclusive. For this recommendation to be effective, employers need to be committed to following through on information provided through the ERGs and develop and implement practices from the ERGs. Failure to do so will only erode the trust between management and employees from underrepresented groups as well as reduce the level of employee engagement in the workplace.

The third and final strategy to improve employee engagement in the workforce is developing and implementing training on employee engagement for leaders and managers. There is a large emphasis on the visible outcomes of employee engagement (e.g., lower turnover, increased commitment etc.) without a clear understanding of the process that leads to these outcomes (Shuck, 2020). Therefore, it is important that leaders understand how higher levels of employee engagement can be attained in the workforce. These trainings should focus on engagement typologies (e.g. work engagement, employee engagement, job engagement) as well as how to determine the most appropriate way to define and measure engagement specific to the employer's workforce. Measuring employee engagement should not be limited to a yearly event and nor should it be tied to incentives such as bonuses as this will only conceal the level of employee engagement and hide the true level of engagement that exists (Osam & Shuck, 2020). To counter this, employers should consider periodic (e.g. quarterly) employee engagement checks or 'pulse' checks aimed at understanding how employees feel about the workplace and receiving feedback on employee engagement practices that are being implemented.

Limitations and Conclusion

There were several limitations to this study. First, this was a convenience sample who's only limiting parameter for participation was full or part time employment. As previously mentioned, there is a body of research supporting the use of MTurk as a data collection method, but it should also be noted that individuals were monetarily incentivized to participate. Second, the data collection for this study took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that within our sample, self-reported stress and anxiety were higher than typical. Similarly, the links between ethical leadership, employee engagement, and our wellbeing variables may have been strengthened or weakened due to the impact of COVID-19 on organizations and their employees. If data were collected again, it is possible that the relationships found in this study may or may not replicate. Third, it is known that ethical leadership can have positive impacts on distal outcomes. This study assessed two such variables which were proxy variables for wellbeing. Wellbeing is a multifaceted and complex construct, and as such, additional wellbeing variables should be investigated in relation to ethical leadership and employee engagement.

Additional research is needed to assess the primary causes and drivers of wellbeing variables, and to determine the most appropriate preventative steps organizations can use to alleviate stress and anxiety before it becomes damaging. The present research assessed two important variables in the mitigation of stress and anxiety, but there are an abundance of additional organizational culture, training, and individual-difference (e.g., personality, cognitive ability) variables that should be examined. Likewise, the interactional nature of these to-be-studied variables should be theoretically and empirically evaluated. Additionally, because the present study demonstrates the benefits of ethical leadership and employee engagement, researchers should investigate how the positive effects of both variables can be magnified and accentuated through inclusion of additional variables. Organizations are complex and layered, and there is no perfect strategy for the promotion of employee wellbeing. The present study found two variables within organizations that can be beneficial in

the reduction of employee stress and anxiety, but they are by no means comprehensive in their capacity to benefit employees. Further, stress and anxiety represent two proxies of wellbeing, and the combined positive impact of ethical leadership and employee engagement should be studied in relation to other wellbeing-related variables. It is important that organizations continually assess how they can help their employees, and this research identifies two important means of doing so.

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